UF's Innovation Academy reschedules traditional learning

By BRITTANY SHAMMAS

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Michael Tamayo started his freshman year at the University of Florida, but he didn’t show up for his first day until January.

The 18-year-old Naples native and Gulf Coast High School graduate is one of about 330 students enrolled in Florida’s Innovation Academy, a new program that ditches the traditional August to May college calendar. Those in the academy take classes during the winter and summer semesters.

They’re barred from taking courses on campus in the fall.

“In the fall, you’re stuck in one place waiting to get there,” Tamayo said. “But honestly, it was totally worth the wait.”

Students in the academy can use their fall semesters to study abroad, gain work experience, take online courses or complete credits at other schools. They choose from 29 majors in seven colleges. They’ll all graduate with a minor in innovation after taking classes about creativity, entrepreneurship, leadership ethics and innovation.

The program launched this year with the goal of relieving crowded fall semesters and taking advantage of the quieter spring and summer semesters and, at the same time, emphasizing innovation. Administrators hope to eventually reach an enrollment of about 2,000.

Jeff Citty, director of the Innovation Academy, said students in the program benefit by being able to network with CEOs of young companies and having had a robust, unique college experience. The academy also offers its own campus housing, an internship program and a speaker series.

Citty said students in the program will boast 21st century and creative thinking skills, which should stand out to employers.

“These are the types of skills we’re setting our students up with that are going to make a difference when sitting next to a person with the same credentials,” he said.
Citty said one of the hurdles faced in launching the program has been convincing students to adapt to the unconventional schedule, noting that education has a long-standing tradition of operating on a fall to spring calendar.

“But I think we’re up to it,” he said. “I think we can find students who are interested in this.”

Already, administrators have addressed an issue raised by the inaugural class: Not being able to purchase football tickets. Citty said they will be available to Innovation Academy students starting next year.

Ryan Vasallo, a Seacrest Country Day School graduate, said he was initially “a little shocked” at being admitted to the Innovation Academy program. The 19-year-old mathematics major said he had simply clicked a box indicating interest in the program, but his acceptance letter told him he was accepted into the Innovation Academy and wouldn’t start class until the spring.

“I closely considered my other options and ended up choosing to go to UF anyway,” Vasallo wrote in an email. “Although there are some downfalls to the program, I am very happy that I am here and am a Gator.”

He spent his fall semester living and working in Boynton Beach, and taking classes online. The experience helped him grow, he said.

Vasallo said he’s excited about having a break from classes during the fall, which gives him the freedom to enjoy the semester. He also hopes to have an opportunity to help shape the program as part of its inaugural class.

Tamayo spent his fall semester living at home and completing classes at Florida Gulf Coast University. A political science major, he hopes to spend a future fall semester interning in Washington, D.C. He said the academy’s schedule should open up internship opportunities, because the majority of students are looking for them in the summer.

One of the best parts of being in the program, Tamayo said, is being among the first to try it out. If he hadn’t enrolled, he pointed out, he would be one of 6,800 students who showed up for the first day of classes in August.

“You’d always be a normal student,” Tamayo said. “With Innovation Academy, you’re the first.”